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Beijing's New Flame

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Currently the London correspondent for NPR, Rob Gifford also covered China for six years and his recently published [China Road](#) continues to receive [positive reviews](#). Here, Gifford has allowed China Beat to reprint a piece reflecting on Beijing's renewed building boom that originally appeared in [Condé Nast Traveler](#).
By Rob Gifford

The essence of Beijing has always been found in its buildings. The city has no major river, no coastline. There are some hills to the west and the north, with the Great Wall stretched across them, but there is none of the geographic razzle-dazzle that created towns like Hong Kong or San Francisco or Sydney or Istanbul. As the historian Arnold Toynbee noted when he visited in the 1930s, Beijing as a city owes little to nature and everything to art.

The art of which Toynbee wrote was contained within the ancient walls of the Forbidden City, where the emperor resided at the heart of old Beijing. But the art was also the buildings themselves: beautiful, angular structures that suffused the dusty soil beneath them with an imperial significance, sanctifying an otherwise unremarkable spot on the North China Plain.

The man responsible for creating Beijing was the third emperor of the Ming dynasty, known as Yongle. On his orders, between 1405 and 1421 thousands of workers constructed a new city, a city that would be the new capital not just of China but of the world, and indeed the universe. In traditional thinking, all under heaven belonged to Yongle, and all the world revolved around his domain, a belief made explicit by the country's name for itself: Zhong Guo, the Middle Kingdom.

There was a reason for the Chinese to believe this, too. At the time, China, though a little past its heyday, was still the world's economic superpower. With no competitors (Europe had yet to rise), China was confident of its moral and financial superiority, and Yongle's capital was appropriately grand, fit for the throne of the Son of Heaven. Built according to ancient rules of geomancy and surrounded by suffocating layers of walls, its design reflected the cosmic symmetry that the emperor sought to keep in balance through his just and harmonious rule.

But such cosmic (and terrestrial) equilibrium is hard to maintain indefinitely. After a final, fatal flowering under the Qing dynasty in the eighteenth century, China fell into a death spiral of humiliation and semi-colonization. By the late nineteenth century, Western incursions had transformed it from Alpha Male Middle Kingdom to Sick Man of Asia, struggling on the periphery of the modern world.

Now, though, the wheel is once again turning.

When China's current ruler, President Hu Jintao, declares the Games of the XXIX Olympiad open in August 2008, he will be looking out upon a city that, like the entire country, bears little resemblance to the one Yongle knew. The stadium where he will be standing—modern Beijing's own imperial palace—is one of the most talked-about buildings in Asia. Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron have dubbed their creation the Bird's Nest, an allusion to the strands of steel that weave around its frame, but it looks more like a shiny silver spaceship that has landed amid the browns and grays of northern Beijing. Certainly its design is alien to any Chinese architectural tradition. But that's the point: Beijing is being rebuilt along Western lines—not weighed down with the heavy symbolism of Chinese tradition but exploding with the sparks of Western postmodernism. Now it is the Bird's Nest that is suffusing the dusty soil, this time with a twenty-first-century significance.

Adjacent to the Bird's Nest is another example of this new aesthetic—an angular, rectangular structure whose exterior is a honeycomb of blue bubbles. Known as the Water Cube and designed by the Australian firm PTW Architects, it will be the stage for the Olympic swimming and diving events.



Farther south, in the Central Business District—not far from Tiananmen Square—looms another monument to the changed Chinese psyche: the new headquarters of China Central Television (CCTV). Dutch maestro Rem Koolhaas's \$600 million project has twisted twin towers that seem to leap from the earth, embracing each other in midair. Beside the square itself is the titanium egg that is the National Theater, its smooth lines clashing with the ancient Greece-meets-Soviet Union angles and pillars of Tiananmen. There, eyed warily by the twenty-five-foot portrait of Chairman Mao, a forty-three-foot-high clock counts down the minutes to the Opening Ceremony on August 8.

These new architectural masterpieces are testaments to the rule-flouting individualism that is changing China's cities, symbols of the break the country has made with its past, and celebrations of the country's brave new post-Mao world. They speak of the psychological transformation, not to mention the confusion, in the Chinese mind. And they speak of the eagerness of the Chinese people to leap into a postmodern world, even as huge parts of the country are only just learning what it means to be modern. Nowhere is the metamorphosis more evident than in Beijing, a city of fourteen million that has changed more in fifteen years than it did in the previous five hundred. The capital is still discovering its new identity, and in its quest, walls have become windows as a vertical city rises from the carcass of the old horizontal one.

This rebirth has come at a price. You can still visit the heart of Yongle's spectacular Forbidden City, with its maze of rich red walls and its yellow roof tiles heavy with history, but much of the rest of the city has been destroyed. Many of Beijing's ancient hutongs, or alleyways, some of which date to the fourteenth century, have been demolished, and their sense of community has died with them. The sounds and smells of old Beijing have disappeared. Traditional courtyard houses have been knocked down to make way for unremarkable apartment buildings and office blocks. The cosmic balance has been lost, replaced by a capitalist iconoclasm that has proved as destructive as Communist iconoclasm was in its day. Many people have complained about the destruction of Beijing's heritage, but their complaints have run up against one of Beijing's few remaining walls: the wall of Communist party power.

Who knows if that wall, too, will crumble? For now, though, this and many other questions about the future have been put on hold, suspended in time until after the Olympics. The shiny ziggurats of Beijing issue a welcome as outsiders—both Chinese and foreign—hasten to observe and participate in the transformation. The glass and metal, the curved edges and winking windows, all whisper of something more than just the gentle shock of a new architectural order. They proclaim a new cosmic order: that China is open, that it is looking forward and outward as never before. And they declare

that Beijing—the imperial city, the capital city, and now the Olympic city—has once again become the center of the world.

Photo by Matt Merkel-Hess

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